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ABSTRACT

The program described in this paper, based on the language experience approach, considers students' needs, the first of which is immediate success and the second of which is perception of the value of improving their communication skills. In the first unit, the student composes a story or a report on tape and in the second unit, the student presents a short illustrated report. Subsequent units involve research on subjects of interest to students, including note taking on cards, taping and retaping the material, transcription (using either writing or typing), editing, illustrating, composing a glossary, and formulating five questions on the text. No failing grades are given, and students are free to repeat the course as often as necessary. This program was successfully implemented at both the junior and senior high school levels and shows promise--from results of a study conducted at a Florida community college--of being effective at the junior college level. (JM)

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Compensatory Education: Too Little, Too Late?

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Is compensatory education at the junior college indeed a case of too little, too late? Administrators, counselors, and instructors have admitted privately, if not publicly, that remedial and compensatory programs are not succeeding adequately. Too many students who enroll in such programs are dropping out either before the program has been completed or soon after. The fact that this particular student has a variety of special needs has been carefully documented by a large body of research which points out that no program can succeed unless it meets those needs.

I developed the program which I am about to describe with the assistance and support of a large number of administrators, counselors, and teachers in Palm Beach County in 1969. It was implemented in seventh and eighth grades with phenomenal success. In 1972 I transferred to the high school and implemented the same program, refined and developed, with high school juniors and seniors. Again there was statistical evidence that this program did more to improve not only the reading level but also the self concept and academic achievement of the majority of students enrolled in it to a significant degree.

The program was so successful that in the fall of 1973 it was implemented at Broward Community College in Broward County, Florida. Ninety four first time enrollees scored below the

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25th percentile on the Florida Twelfth Grade Test and were enrolled in the SPANS Program Reading Component. Forty two of these attended classes on the North Campus and acted as a control group. The other fifty two attended classes on the Central Campus. They were in the experimental program. All sections, two in each group, were assigned to the same instructor, a regular member of the Broward Community College faculty, who had been teaching reading to the SPANS students for more than a year.

The program is firmly based on the language experience approach. What is new is that it considers the needs and problems of the student. It aims to improve self concept while allowing the use of communications skills competencies learned but not demonstrated. To make progress possible to these students the first need is for immediate success which the student perceives as both valid and worthwhile. The second need, equal in importance to the first, is for the student to perceive a need for improving his communications skills.

At the beginning of the program all subjects were administered the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, form A; the Revised Beta Examination, and an information survey. They were requested to complete the drawing of a person, no stick figures allowed, and to label the drawing with the occupation of the figure drawn.

The first two units of the program are primarily planned for the students to learn the process. Groups of four or five students compose a story or a report on tape. The subject must be something that interests the students. After they have taped their production, they must transcribe and illustrate it for the rest of the class to read and evaluate. Then the students go on to the next unit, which is completed by each individual working alone. This unit should also be completed fairly quickly so the student can see immediate results. It is a short illustrated report demonstrating to the other students, to the instructor, and the the student, himself, how much he knows about the subject he has chosen. Subsequent units are more ambitious, involving

research on subjects of interest to the student. The important point is that the student reads from at least four sources in an area of interest and importance.

The student takes notes on 3 x 5 cards, learning to read a paragraph and paraphrase it, or better still, simply write the main idea of the paragraph on one card and any necessary supporting details on other cards. Each source is entered on a separate card, to be alphabetized later in a bibliography. When all the research has been completed, the student organizes his note cards into logical order. He may then realize that further research is needed, or perhaps some cards duplicate each other and may be discarded.

From these cards comes the first taping. He listens to the tape to discover whether it says what he wants to say the way he wants to say it. He may retape as many times as he believes it is necessary. When he is satisfied with what he has accomplished, he transcribes his tape, writes or types it neatly, checking his spelling and mechanics, then plans and executes illustrations. He must then alphabetize a glossary of key and/or "hard" words from his report and write at least five questions on the text. These should be both fact and inference questions.

Teacher assistance is given whenever requested, but never in the form of "right" answers. The student must learn that he, himself, can answer most of his own questions if he tries. The instructor assists in that process by careful questions which probe the student's questions. When each report is finished, it should be bound in a folder with a colorful title page and distributed to the other students for comment, discussion, and evaluation.

There are many advantages to composing on tape. The use of the tape recorder separates writing into two discrete tasks. First organizing and composing content into a coherent whole, using the largest vocabulary available to the student, and second, applying acceptable standards of spelling, punctuation,

paragraphing, and mechanics to a well-written report. The special student is so deficient in the latter skills that he is usually unable to perform the former on paper. He can do it on tape if he is aware that he can and is aware that it will help him to improve skills he needs.

It is widely recognized that communications skills are closely related. Reading skills can be improved through work on skills of writing, speaking, and listening. Bruner reminds us that writing and reading are second order abstractions, lacking not only a present referent, but also the steering provided by dialogue. The special student needs to master the language in its entirety, something he has failed to do in previous schooling. The language experience approach, expanded and adapted to fit his special needs, offers not only a means of improving these skills, but also a means of enhancing his self concept by showing him graphically how much he can do if he tries.

During the final week of the quarter, the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, form B, was administered to all students remaining is all sections: thirty six in the experimental group and twenty six in the control group. A second projective drawing was made. Pre and post test scores for the reading test were paired, then ranked according to teacher evaluation. The raw scores for the three sub-tests of the Nelson-Denny were converted to z-scores, using the means and standard deviations given in the test manual. These converted data were used in an analysis of covariance to test the first hypothesis: there is no statistically significant difference between students in the two groups.

The pre test scores were used as the control variable for the analysis of covariance to test the significance of difference between the adjusted means of the two treatment groups. Results showed there was no statistically significant difference between the groups for vocabulary, but there was significant difference between the groups for both paragraph comprehension and total reading. The fact that there was no difference between the experimental and control groups on the vocabulary tests may be

due to the fact that the control program is heavily oriented to vocabulary development. An examination of all the data, however, demonstrates the failure of students in either group to achieve reading scores above the mean for college freshmen.

Since the ability to read college texts is the first necessity for academic college level courses, it may be inferred that although the experimental group did achieve significantly greater gains in reading than the students in the control group, insufficient gains were made to claim success as defined in the context of this study.

The paired drawings made by the students during the first and last week of the quarter were compared and evaluated on the basis of five criteria: size, page placement, stroke and pressure, facial expression, and general maturity of drawing. Each pair of drawings was evaluated for gain, loss, or no change on each criterion. The results for each group were tabulated. These data were used in the test of Chi square, corrected for continuity, to test the second hypothesis: there is no statistically significant difference in change in self concept between the two treatment groups.

Hypothesis two was accepted on four of the five criteria, because Chi square was not significant except on page placement criterion. An examination of the data, however, showed that Chi square did approach significance on the size of drawing criterion.

Hypothesis three states there is no statistically significant difference between changes in self concept and changes in reading in the two groups. This hypothesis was also accepted since Chi square, corrected for continuity, was not statistically significant for either group. An examination of the data showed the relationship for the experimental group did approach significance. The question remains: if the study is replicated for a longer period of time or under more favorable conditions, will Chi square reach significance? A careful examination of the data showed the first nineteen students in the experimental group as ranked

by teacher evaluation showed gains in both reading and self concept. The students ranked in the first nineteen places in the control group did not all show gains in both areas. Six scored lower on the post test than on the pre test and one showed no change (reading). Only five of the nineteen showed gains in self concept. Four students, including the one ranked first and the one ranked third in teacher evaluation, gained in reading, but lost in self concept.

Hypothesis four states there is no statistically significant difference in persistence in the program between students in the control and students in the experimental group. Persistence in this study was defined as remaining in the program through post tests. Sixty nine percent of the experimental group and sixty two percent of the control group persisted. Difference is persistence was tested using the z-test for correlated proportions. The z statistic was not significant and hypothesis four was accepted. It is interesting to note, however, that six students in each group received No Grade, and no credit for the quarter. If these students were considered to have withdrawn rather than persisted, the z statistic does become significant.

The information survey showed that all the students in the study came from the same extreme pool. Every student was enrolled in at least one other SPANS component (speech, English, math, social studies, science). No failing grades are given. Students who do not succeed in the program receive a grade of NG which does not affect grade point averages. They are free to repeat the course as often as they, their instructors, or their counselors believe it would be profitable.

It is of course more important to know why students withdraw from the program before the end of the quarter than to know how many withdraw. Withdrawal without penalty is permitted up to this fifth week. Six students in the experimental group simply stopped coming to class in the first month. One student withdrew after six weeks because he could not afford to continue and was not eligible for finanicial aid. One student had attended

only three sessions (in six weeks). Two more attended six and nine weeks respectively, attending approximately one hour every two weeks. Another student was arrested after fifteen sessions. A twelfth student withdrew when he became a father. He said he needed to hold two jobs to support the new baby.

Two students entered the armed forces, one after attending fifteen sessions. His primary reason for enrolling was to play in the band, but his hatred of school was often vehemently expressed. The other, who was his friend, left after attending thirty hours. Another, who left after completing two thirds of the program, was a loner with a very weak self concept. Although the teacher tried to convince him he was making progress, he was not able to believe it. He had no friends in the class and refused to join any group. The final withdrawal in the group was in college to play basketball. He claimed he intended to get a basketball scholarship at a four-year college. After several disagreements with the coach and with the English teacher, he withdrew from the program. He had attended thirty six sessions.

Half of the students who withdrew from the control group did so without penalty. None offered a reason, nor did any of them confer with the teacher before dropping out. Four more simply stopped coming to class in the month following. Three students withdrew after attending fifteen sessions.

The reasons students enroll in such a program is an important factor in whether or not they will persist. Those students who really perceive a need to improve their skills and believe they have some chance to do so are more likely to persist than those students who enroll for reasons that do not have any direct educational bearing. There are too many factors involved to come to any conclusions. Even with those students who stated reasons before withdrawing, it is impossible to be certain their stated reasons were their real reasons.

It is necessary to recognize the limitations of the study. The students in both groups were allowed only three hours a week for the fifteen weeks of the quarter. The first two weeks and the final week were used for orientation and testing, leaving

only twelve weeks for actual work in the experimental program. At the same time they carried a full load of general education courses either for institutional or transfer credit. It is obvious that in this brief amount of time it is unrealistic to expect to remediate and compensate for twelve years of academic failure. Especially is this true when the damage to self esteem of these students is carefully considered. For those students who have made significant gains in reading comprehension, accompanied by gains in self concept, it is possible that with or without further class work in reading, reading improvement will continue. It is not yet known whether this improvement persists after compensatory teaching ends.

Unfortunately this is the last year for the SPANS Program, since funds have been withdrawn. Because some of the difference in change between the treatment groups did approach significance in favor of the experimental group, and since the gains in reading comprehension were so much greater, it would be desirable to repeat the study under more favorable conditions. All the students in this study were carrying a full academic load and the time allotted to the program was inadequate. A reduced load with enrollment in the experimental program allowing at least six hours a week for reading is a more pragmatic approach to the problem of compensatory education. Even more desirable would be an intensive pre-enrollment quarter in reading and study skills based on the program described in this study. It must be noted that in the secondary schools where the program was so successful, it was used for either a full eighteen week semester, or for a full year, five days a week, at least one hour a day.

It is obvious that without adequate reading skills, academic success is almost completely impossible in college level courses. It seems logical, therefore, to improve the reading skills of the special student before allowing enrollment in courses requiring those skills. The pragmatic answer to the basic problem is, of course, improvement of reading in the elementary and early secondary years. Students must be allowed to learn to read. Implementation of the Open Door policy without the expenditure of huge sums

of money for compensatory education depends upon making that education unnecessary. Until it is possible to remove the need, however, more and better reading programs must be developed and implemented, or the open door should be closed.

The program described in this study shows some promise of being both effective and economically feasible. If such programs as this cannot be implemented, at a cost which makes them economically feasible for the community junior college, the whole philosophy of universal higher education may need to be reevaluated.